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TOPs

A NEW BALANCE OF POWER  
DEPENDENCE, INDEPENDENCE, INTERDEPENDENCE  
Between the Generations: Oscillating Power-Dynamics.

In the last two sessions we have experienced, with delight, the value of dialog in setting the issue for T.O.Ps. programs. When relationships are central to the discussion, more than one voice, more than one point of view is essential.

If there ever existed a situation that demands more than one perspective it is when the oscillating power-dynamics between generations is being considered.

Whose story is it anyway? What about your family? Who tells the real story? I am never more amazed than when my progeny start comparing versions of incidents that took place years ago. They are often very different from my description of the same incident. My version, of course, is what really happened!! At least it is comforting to think so.

One of the powers of the powerful that is seldom brought to light is the ability to have their version of the story recorded. The rest of us have little chance to give the story from our point of view.

I won't be telling many stories but please know that the stories I do tell will have my own personal bias worked throughout. Elizabeth Janeway who wrote "The Powers of The Weak" enlarges on this thought. She says "The significance of what the weak (meaning the most of us) are told is really <sup>happened</sup> there has been filtered through the heads of those who see their role as being in charge: in charge of public life, in

in charge of morality, and most important of all, in charge of deciding what's important.

If the weak have to accept the stories as told by the powerful do they have any power at all to influence what happens in a specific family encounter? What are the powers of those family members not considered to be powerful--the young and the old? If we are going to arrive at ~~A~~ New Balance of Power as the title of this series indicates,

Seeking to understand power from the perspective of the powerless requires that we first of all examine and question the way the powerful, the dominants, have defined the word itself--for of course the powerful not only tell the stories they also define the meaning of words.

In general power has been defined as an attribute or a quality possessed by the powerful---authority, control, command, sway, dominion, jurisdiction. It has been seen as a desirable characteristic that some people have and others should strive to acquire?

But power must be something else. "Power-dynamics between generations", our subject for today, suggests that something is going on in relationships-- between ~~between~~ the supposedly powerful and the less powerful. Indeed "oscillating power-dynamics" implies that constant movement and change is taking place in the lives

of all members of the family.

A constant input and feedback. Is power also a process?

Janeway holds that power is a process that both reflects and produces a continuing dynamic of human interaction. It is the push and pull, the thrust and response, the hope and frustration, and the practical actions that grow out of the confrontations and compromises among its human components.

Paul Tillich in his lectures on Love, Power and Justice appears to support this concept of power saying, "Power is real only in its actualization, in the encounter with other bearers of power and, in the ever-changing balance which is the result of these encounters. "Life", he says, "is the dynamic actualization of being". Experience of this dynamic of power is basic to knowing that we exist.

I must confess that I found this concept difficult to wrap my mind around. It wasn't until I returned in memory to the mother-daughter dance with my third child (~~I'll refer to~~ that I began to think in terms of power as process ~~my first two later~~). More often than not the child led the dance--pushing this way and that--demanding food, dry pants, cuddling, sleep, more food, more dry pants more cuddling. If I started leading <sup>the dance</sup> and denied the demands we didn't dance together so well.

<sup>that child.</sup> Memory follows. She is crawling away, but looking back. She is standing---now pulling things off the tables--exploring her world.

NO! NO! NO! Defiant. Look at me! I exist! She must be two years old. Each mother here can follow in memory one or more children as they were reaching for their sense-of self

in relation to and in connection with others. It is a  
 life-long process. <sup>Children</sup> adults are still  
 reaching for theirs.

When we talk about a balance of power within families I visualize a weighing instrument with a bar swaying on a central fulcrum according to the weights in the pans suspended at the ends of the bar. There are little people in the pans weighted, not for their avoirdupois but for their influence in the family. The smallest child may be sitting in one pan and the parents and a larger sibling may be in the other pan and yet the small child out-weighs the other three and their pan rises while the small child sinks. That may appear a bit exceptional but we all know of families where the power-dynamics have resulted in the youngest being in control.

Actually the situation is usually much different. Father weighs in heavily in power, out-weighing the rest of the family.

At our house we talked a great game at being a traditional family. We played with votes. Theoretically each of the three children had one vote. I as mother and wife had three votes. When the children voted together I could tie them but then there <sup>supposedly</sup> was a stalemate until dad came home with his seven votes. That charade was for public consumption more than anything else. I am certain that each of us experienced the power process quite differently from that and also quite differently than each of the others. From my perspective I generally knew that I could out-vote the children and they knew it also. That is, when they were young. And they and I could match or out-vote Dad. Well, most of the

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time. It all changed as the young people developed self-esteem and responsibility.

*Power dynamics oscillated in our families*

We can talk lightly about power in this fashion but this is the family serious business. We are talking about ~~the~~ milieu where the culture expects the next generation to be produced, preserved, nurtured and shaped. We are also talking about the setting where patriarchal consciousness is first experienced and nurtured. We are talking about changing the balance of power in the basic building block of the patriarchal state and patriarchal society.

If we expect to change the balance of power within the entire family and not merely between the parents jostling for a place on the hierarchical ladder, we are thinking of new relationships and new roles for fathers ~~and~~ mothers ~~and~~ <sup>→ grand parents.</sup> children. We'll need to talk about the relinquishing of ~~power~~ <sup>power</sup> as well as about empowerment. It is a great feeling to be empowered, It is something else again when one is required to give-up or share power previously claimed.

Life was simpler when I was a child. We travelled by horse and buggy, or horse and bob-sled and by <sup>a team of</sup> horses and kid-hack as the school bus was then called. Our connections to the larger community were the party telephone line, the weekly paper from the county seat, the Country Gentleman and the Sears and Roebuck catalog. Not to be overlooked, to be sure, was the Family Bible. God's creation was our reality.. Inklings of Darwin and the Origin of the Species touched us slightly if at all and Freud, Jung, Erickson etc. were unheard of. We had no ego, no id, no libido and no superego. Sex relations were not mentioned and the stork brought the babies.

Only recently has it occurred to me that I was born in a two career family. My parents shared the work and managing of a small enterprise--a one hundred acre farm in the midwest. Both worked at home, sharing many of the out-of-doors tasks. Both were considered economic contributors.

Youth and adult accounted for the stages of life. Children were not born to develop a life of their own so much as to give a hand with the work that needed to be done for sheer survival and enough cash to pay the mortgage and with luck a bit to save for a rainy day.

Lists categorizing the power of dominants are now available. Although we didn't think in these terms then, my parents had authority vested in their position--the position of parenthood. They also had power vested in a sizeable stockpile of distributable rewards and punishments. Mother also had authority vested in her due to her connection to an

important, all powerful third party. She and God were close allies. That made a tremendous difference in dynamic of power relationships in our family. On another occasion I shared with this group/the role that God played in my life. I regularly marched off to the neighborhood church with my mother as dad sat on the porch quietly scanning the fields, orchard and the animals grazing nearby.

Dad's relationship with the life-forces all around seemed, at the time, to be a peripheral source of influence at best. What I couldn't see then was the ultimate influence on my sense of relatedness to the totality of life--on my spirituality-- that dad's "being" fostered. Influence moves in subtle ways.

I could not perceive my own influence in our parent-child relationship nor can I now name it. I simply grew, accepting without question, apparently, the fact that the powers vested in my parents gave them the right to name what was happening and what was important and I wove many of their values into the fabric of my own life.

The dynamic of the situation now appears to have contributed to my emerging sense-of-self <sup>needing</sup> as <sup>to</sup> be needed--needed to do ever increasingly difficult physical and mental tasks. In hind-sight, inlight of Freud and subsequent concepts of human development, I now see that I also needed to make things work out right for my mother whose source of physical and even emotional distress I felt myself to be.

Having insisted on being born in the first place and daring to be female in the second place, I assumed both guilt and blame. Mother had what was then called "female trouble" and

supposedly was not to bear children. I , however, after existing for three months as what was diagnosed to be a tumor <sup>ultimately</sup> called the bluff and/forced my way into this world. What power!! What guilt!! Controlling events and damaging my even before mother. I was ~~born~~ presaged frightening things to come.

Who is guilty when bad things happen? Me

Who is responsible if things don't work out right for those I love? Me.

What did I do wrong? It must be my fault!!!! If someone blows a car horn--I must be in the wrong lane, be cutting someone out, be going too slowly or too fast--Which one? Of course they are merely signalling to a friend .

With my need to be needed and my omnipotent guilt ( I learned the term in reading Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst.) my power might be likened to the upside down version of God's Power. God is the boost on the side of the winner. I am the <sup>potential</sup> flaw on the side of the loser. ( Don't watch the 7th game of the world series. Merely watching may zap the Red Sox!).

I undertook a big assignment. <sup>today</sup> Three quarters of a century can't be encapsulated easily. But hang in there, I'm moving along.

What social group is in charge in our culture? Midlife gets the vote hand's down. But we didn't realize the fact until the next generation--the "me" generation--started taking it away from us and we were hard-put to do a holding action.

Life was more complicated by the time I moved into the parent role. We were mobile both on land and sea with the automo-



bile and the airplane and a larger world came to our door through radio and soon after by way of television. The second generation--approximately 30 years-- began with World War II and ended as Vietnam was slowly--oh, so slowly--winding to a close. Change was in the air. The only constant was change. There's a KNOWLEDGE explosion! Knowledge, they say, is power. They also say--"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." How much is enough?

We've all acquired egos and ids and other personality devices. Life not only seems longer, it is longer. And , of course, there's the BOMB and also adolescence--both tremendous hazards but considered boosts to the economy. It's the age of hi-tech!

As parents we assumed power of the position and had our own stockpile of distributable rewards and punishments. My connection to a selected third party differed from my mother's. The word was out! God was dead. In his place on the platform at the top of the hierarchical ladder were those white, male prestigious professionals <sup>THE EXPERTS.</sup> Prestige is power. Professionalism is power. Marge Piercy says, "We take the allotting of prestige for granted". and also "Professionalism oppresses." "It destroys others pride and ability to think"

I didn't know that back then. Determined to be a supermom, I turned to the highly touted authorities. All sorts of experts took up residence in my head and exerted a disproportionate amount of influence on how I played out my parenting role.

Unlike my forced arrival at birth, our three children were all planned <sup>and warmly welcomed</sup> It was the thermometer and graph that revealed ovulation time.

Looking back at the power dynamics in our family it now seems that as parents we defined limits, named what was important celebrated life together for many years. That doesn't hide the fact that from day one each child had influence with parents and with other siblings. Power is not only an attribute <sup>THAT</sup> of the powerful have. It is , I believe available to all living plants and animals. In human beings it is developed through relationships.

With the three children there were tensions--pushing and pulling--going on among them as well as between generations. Sue, the middle one now sees Steve , 14 months older as having ~~had~~ a lot of influence in her life. Linda, the youngest, the one that I thought picked up a lot of control early on now says that she needed to go through all of her childhood antics to get noticed at all by the big four--her mother and father and older brother and sister.

Steve reports to Linda that he saw her , 5 years younger than he, as barely a factor at all in the family dynamics that involved him. Sue, on the other hand, says Linda, nearly four years younger than she, was of another generation so rapidly had the tempo of change speeded up! That difference, she believed was due to the Sexual revolution.

This last statement convinces me all the more that what is going on in the culture makes a great difference in the dynamics of family life. In addition, what happens in one family also influences subsequent generations.

By the time I reached the third stage of my life the culture --our American society was a throw-a-way society--remember the automobile junk yards that marred the country-side? What wasn't so obvious were the junk yards for old-people.

The "ME" generation, now over 30, picked up and built on the attitude that viewed those over 60 as a societal problem rather than a resource.

There was a pervasive and powerful ideology that set the aged apart from the rest of society as a group with needs that require special policies and programs.

This approach institutionalizes and reinforces the marginality of the aging by legitimating an industry of agencies, providers and planners that must continually reaffirm the out-group status of the aged in order to maintain and expand their own activities.

I came to this stage of life very needy. Remember, a controlling factor in my life is my need to be needed. Being needed as a daughter, a wife, a mother had been my identity. But the children had gone off to college and then scattered around the country and abroad taking up their individual lives. My mother and husband had recently died within six weeks of one another. For the last seven years caring for their needs had been an overwhelming task but I had been needed. Now, no one needed me.

But I had built my being, the sense of power that I had, on being needed by those I loved.

Relinquishing one's sense of power is devastating- so devastating that we may be whistling in the dark in this series in which we are seeking a NEW BALANCE OF POWER.

If I had lost my sense of self--who <sup>was</sup> am I? After a long painful and revealing period of self-assessment ~~and-of-self-assessment~~ I decided to build on the fact that I was female and growing older.

In a way I was born again in my head. I began looking at the underside of all that I had been taught and had embraced in my former existence. Feminism was rampant, I joined the growing throng. Gradually I was becoming a stranger-- even a betrayer of my children. I was now criticizing the experts, <sup>in my former life</sup> ~~the~~ very professions that I/had encouraged them to <sup>join</sup> ~~become~~.

So the dynamic continues--now in the arena of ideas.

Until our dying day we continue to build our ever-changing sense of self.

As I was preparing this part of the paper I gathered together many of the expressions of affirmation that I have received from my family. Although many of my ideas are controversial they are glad that I am staying in the public arena and not moving to the bleachers as society claims old <sup>as a category</sup> people/are inclined to--actually want to--at my age. That is one of the cultural myths. But ageism permeates the family as it does society. It is difficult to remain visible, not as a physical body, but as the ~~the~~ being that body encapsulates.

On the occasion of ~~Pat's~~ granddaughters 4th birthday and my 70th (her's preceeds mine by four days I went to Oak Ridge, their home, supposedly to celebrate both landmarks. For her birthday there were parties and gifts ~~and~~

I arranged to take us all to the circus. At the circus I was given , by my daughter, the choice of which child (there's a sister five years older) ~~that~~ I wanted to sit beside. I chose to sit beside their mother, my daughter. I was trying to make a statement. After all--what is wrong with the question of "Who wants to sit beside <sup>mother?</sup> Grandma?"

As the days wore on I began to see that the celebration of my birthday was to watch and share in the celebration of ~~Sas~~Sarah's birthday.

WHAT TO DO? Here I ~~am~~ <sup>was</sup>, fighting ageism and still permitting myself to be invisible--not my body--but the self that needs affirmation as do we all.

Finally I came to breakfast on the day before I was to leave Sarah's and announced--"Well, I'm ready to stop celebrating my birthday and ~~begin~~ celebrating mine. My Daughter was stunned! "My God, mother , what would please you?" "I don't know," I said "but let's start with queens and goddesses."

Susan is <sup>so</sup> ~~so~~ resourceful. Before long we had the kind of clay that firms by baking in the oven and the four of us -Me ~~as~~ Grandma, Susan as daughter and Cheryl and Sarah as Grand-daughters. We worked with the Clay, building those pregnant figures ~~pictures~~ from early archeology. And we talked about mothering and about being daughters and we were all affirmed.

At dinner there was a cake for me that the girls had shared in preparing and crowns saying 70years. I was affirmed and I believe that the family ~~saw~~ that there was a being inside that body called Grandma.

THE POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN GENERATIONS GOES ON.